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Interrogating my Social Location

Being an international student means navigating multiple layers of identity and social positioning including race, nationality, language, and culture. My experiences as an international student are shaped by individual factors such as my personal background, personality, goals, and motivations. At the same time, structural factors like immigration policies, being referred to as a non resident alien by the US government, and cultural norms also affect my sense of belonging in this new environment. This essay explores the resonating experiences depicted by Tressie McMillan Cotton through her narration of "thick description", and how that is useful for understanding how social structures shape our experiences not only for African Americans, but also international students like myself. Throughout the examination of these concepts, the essay aims to highlight the challenges and complexities faced by individuals who do not fit into the preexisting societal norms, and emphasize the importance of accepting diverse cultures to create a more inclusive society. I will also support my ideas and personal experiences with Karl Marx's ideas on capitalism, and Max Weber's exemplification on bureaucracy. In this essay, I will analyze Cotton's book "Thick", an attribution of Dubois by Fields & Fields "Racecraft", Durkheim's "Social facts", Karl's "The Marx-Engels Readers", and Max Weber's "Essay in Sociology" and compare how it relates to my personal experience as a non resident alien in a foreign country pursuing my college degree.

Firstly, Cottom discusses capitalism and the extraction of money from workers. She depicts the overall idea that Black women writers do not get rich off their writing, essentially being categorized and undermined in the society based on their skin colour and gender. The quote "Being too much of one thing and not enough of another had been a recurring theme in my life" (Cottom, 2019) directly shows what Cottom experiences in her daily life. "Being too much of one thing", which refers to traits like being too thick, too big in size, too dark for the population to accept her for who she is is an understatement. Alongside that, she is also "not enough of another" suggesting how society sets standards and requires everyone to meet them. This form of redundancy being "too much" yet "not enough" is something I relate to deeply. Although society is getting better at understanding all types of culture, being in a new environment in the United States makes me feel like I am not enough in certain categories. I feel like I have to dress a certain way, look a certain way, and act a certain way at times to fit in in fear of being looked as an outcast that doesn't belong here; therefore, being "not enough" for Americans to understand and accept me into the society. My social location is distorted because I am also "too much" for the society to understand at times, so I result in cutting down explaining my culture to others to prevent them from thinking I'm "too much". In certain South East Asian cultures, we take pride in keeping everything clean and having shoes off, but upon coming to the US, people have referred me as "too much" based on the fact that I try and keep everything clean in my house, which affects my sense of social location and feeling of acceptance. However, a lot of times, "too much" is based on the laziness or misinterpretation of those who say it. People who only experience one culture throughout their whole lives misinterpret, and misunderstand why people, like myself, do certain things differently than them. They believe that how they were taught is how everyone should be, misinterpreting the purpose of being clean and healthy as

“too much”. At the same time, those who complain about life activities that promotes wellness or health also have a lazy mindset; therefore, they think it is “too much” when in fact, they are doing too little themselves. Instead of judging others without knowledge about them, being open minded would better social life and also help everyone learn more than what they think they previously know already.

Furthermore, not only do I feel like the need to fit in for aspects I am “not enough of”, I also feel like my established status in society is stripped right after people find out I am a non resident alien living and utilizing their resources. Cottom depicts this really well in her writing stating that “... nothing about who I was in any other context mattered to them assumptions of my incompetence. I was highly educated. I spoke in the way one might expect of someone with a lot of formal education. I had health insurance. I was married. All of my status characteristics screamed “competent,” but nothing could shut down what my blackness screams when I walk into the room. I could use my status to serve others, but not myself” (Cottom, 2019). Cottom specifically states the existing “assumptions of incompetence”, similar to a stereotype where one already has an idealized image in their head of you, and it is merely impossible, no matter what you do, to change their existing belief. Despite her high quality traits, all these traits were characterized as incompetent hidden under her black skin tone. All these standards set by the society only applies to those they accept and favor. If they do not accept you initially, your status does not change who you are to them, but just another regular Black person. Similar to Cottom, I’ve not only experienced a different treatment at hospital cares once they realized I wasn’t an American citizen, I was actually outcasted and put away from them as they do not feel liable to help me. My questions asked were not responded or taken lightly, and the service provided to me

was similar to what Cottom experienced. “I could use my status to serve others, but not myself” is very powerful in my opinion as it illustrates the unjust system of being qualified to serve others, but not being allowed the same qualifications to be applied on ourselves.

Cottom also writes about how as a Black girl, she is always recognized as the problem without causing one. Her occupation as a journalist isn't accepting of her identity, but she keeps a strong sense of social location despite how others treat her. She discusses similar ideas to Fields' depiction of the veil in the phrase “After a week of labor pains that no one ever diagnosed, because the pain was in my butt and not my back, I could not hold of labor anymore. I was wheeled into a delivery operating room, where I slipped in and out of consciousness... After three eternities an anesthesiologist arrived. He glared at me and said that if I wasn't quiet he would leave and I would not get any pain relief.” (Cottom, 2019). The veil is a concept Fields published that represents a color line that acts like a screen and prevents white people from seeing the full historical culture of the Black humanity. Instead, the veil creates a separation from what they perceive to the real side of the Black community. In this instance, professional doctors mistook her pain for other causes and would not listen to her side of the story, just like how the veil depicts the color line. Despite being in a hospital that is supposed to treat patients for pain, they mistreated her, and even threatened her from being treated because the color line only allows what the doctors wanted to see on the screen: an impatient Black woman who swears a lot, rather than the pain and the oppression she has gone through to react in such outlandish ways to get her needs and be treated as she should. The concept of the veil can also be applied to international students or immigrants as Americans here generalize thoughts about my culture rather than understanding the difficulty of being in a completely new environment. As an Asian

male, I am usually stereotyped for being smart, not athletic, and alienated. When non resident aliens stand out, they are usually either laughed at or ignored and labelled as “weird” just because they can’t see past the veil. Within my short time in America, I have understood the pressure of being different and not fitting in. However, I also perceive the lack of understanding for other cultures within the US. A lot of people tend to label something strange and make fun of those who aren’t doing what the majority does, but every culture has its own meaning and ways of doing; Thus, it is important to see past the veil before judging others because what they do can be perceived as normal back in their culture, and what people do here in the US can be perceived as abnormal back in Taiwan or other SouthEast Asian countries.

Racialized modernity, a main theme from Fields & Fields illustrates how race continues to determine outcomes, opportunities, and global structures. Fields argues that race is a social construction that has been used to justify unequal power relations between different groups of people. “Race stands for the conception or doctrine that nature produced humankind in distinct groups, each defined by inborn traits that its members share and that differentiate them from the members of other distinct groups of the same kind but of unequal rank” (Fields, 2022). Fields claims that “nature produced humankind in distinct groups”, something that is misinterpreted and misused by the human population to oppress others. Racecraft is also the preexisting ideas of race and credibility to justify racism of natural differences between people. Distinct groups also “share and differentiate from members of other distinct groups” which is a natural process to justify Fields’ idea of racecraft based on old debunked ideas, and these differences can apply to the same kind but of unequal ranks, a hierarchical structure humans implemented in the society that benefits white males, but puts down immigrants or aliens like myself as a reserve option.

Since I am deemed as an alienated citizen, people believe that I should have less benefits than others. This can be explained by racecraft, which debunked ideas such as “immigrants take away jobs from native people” preexist and result in an unfair system of oppression and limited opportunities for myself. Other than logistics of citizenship, local companies tend to hire native Americans more than foreigners or international students like myself. At the same time, the acceptance rate for certain major schools at UW prioritizes its in-state or American students, and accepts a lower amount of students that are international. These “naturally produced distinct groups” diminishes opportunities for me to thrive and climb up the corporate ladder, and also make it more difficult for me to enter the working industry and get a headstart like others.

Racialized subjectivity is how you view yourself in the world. Sense of ourselves are developed through patterns of the world we live in, and the color line shapes experiences, interactions, and racial patterns. As an international student from Taiwan, I encounter different forms of racialization than an international student from a different country would due to our different histories of colonization, migration, and racism. Fields states that racism is “the theory and the practice of applying a social, civic, or legal double standard based on ancestry, and to the ideology surrounding such a double standard” (Fields, 2022). I’ve experienced double standards based on ancestry at my time in the US just because I am Asian, some people treat me like I am weaker than them based on stereotypes. At the same time, these ideologies created the double standard I received compared to a regular white male would have. At restaurants, servers provides me with less service, doesn’t really come back around to check on us as much as they do other tables, and expects a big tip despite the double standard treatment I received as an Asian man. Fields also touches upon a sense of twoness that mentions how black people internalize

how they are viewed on both sides of the veil which causes psychological distress on individuals. I think something America doesn't talk about is the constant bullying of Asian people in this community as they are deemed as weak and an easy target. A lot of Asian families that migrated to the US gets picked on regularly and disrespected; thus, similar to the sense of twoness, Asian people also internalize how they are treated on both sides of the veil.

Durkheim's theory of social facts emphasize the power of social norms in shaping our behavior and beliefs, and social facts have affected my sense of social location in a new college environment. I am constantly exposed to new norms and values that differs from my own cultural background. For instance, I have encountered different expectations around academic performance, social relationships, or even gender roles. Durkheim states that "Social fact is every way of acting, whether fixed or not, which is capable of exercising an external constraint on the individual or, which is general throughout a given society, whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations" (Durkheim, 1965). The "external constraint" is the social norm that structures the way we act, but social facts also has its "own individual manifestations" that set unique individuals apart from each other. Understanding these social facts is crucial as an alien adapting to a new environment, but the requirement to be unique with "individual manifestations", and also setting a "constraint" based on norms leads to a sense of disorientation and dislocation for me. Social facts can be so powerful that we feel like its from within, but the negative consequences from ignoring them supports the preexisting stereotypical ideas of Asian people if they do not fit into the social norm.

Moreover, Karl Marx outlines the potential consequences and dark side behind capitalism, something the US represents and promotes to its people. Karl introduces objectification, which he defines as a process whereby humans invest their life force into the creation of objects. “The object which labour produces – labour’s product –confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labour is labour that has been congealed in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labor” (Tucker, 1978). He argues that since work has become objectified, some workers can feel alienated, a negative side of people’s ability to realize they are labor in projects. Specifically, people can be separated from their own humanity as they get degraded at work. For example, food industry servers experience a lot of hardships because customers are not always the best, thus, they feel distanced from the most fundamental part of themselves which is being at work and enjoying the labour system. The consequence of being alienated in the labour force are the legal institutions that enforces laws called private properties. It determines who gets the surplus value, which is the extra above what humans need and reproduce, and who doesn't. This idea of predetermined surplus value given to certain distinct groups is what prohibits certain people from exceeding in their careers. As a foreigner, I am not part of the distinct group that could enjoy the benefits of the labour system, neither am I receiving any surplus value. Those who have surplus gets to exploit the capitalist system, and this is made possible by property rights who gives control to certain people over the means of production. Like I said, those who are not given the flexibility of surplus like myself are exploited and disadvantaged. Sometimes, undocumented workers are also taken advantage of due to a lack of bargaining power and surplus value. This concept is defined as Feudalism by Karl, where the peasants makes the surplus and those with private property keeps the surplus.

Karl Marx specifically discusses the structure of capitalism. Workers don't own any means of production, they sell capacity to work for wages, and as a result, that's how they generate profits. On the other hand, capitalists, those who understand how the system works and are given their position based on rankings and distinct groups, own all means of production, are also the ones who determine and pay the wages, and compete for overall gross profits. Karl states that "The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and extent" (Tucker, 1978). This reflects the notion of alienation in a capitalist society. As an international student, I find myself working hard and contributing to the wealth and productivity of the US, yet I still experience a sense of being marginalized due to factors like immigration policies or cultural differences. Marginalized workers or college students who are about to enter the workforce become "poorer the more wealth produced" because the means of production is what builds power by Capitalists. Therefore, workers are competing for skills while capitalists compete for the overall profit generated by their control over production. Marxian's theory of state affirms that the government is nothing more than the form of organization which the bourgeois necessarily adopt both for internal and external purposes, for the mutual guarantee of their property and interests (Tucker, 1978). Essentially, the government is run by the state that establishes capitalism. They set out standards and rules to favor bourgeois, also known as capitalists, thus guarantees to help them yield profits and develop even larger surpluses.

Under capitalism, Karl argues that commodities are seen as means of making money. This elevates the passion to work and not be lazy. On the bright side, capitalism has fixed scarcity. A lot of previous needs or expenses are not needed anymore as history has taught us,

and since work is deemed as normal and commodities make money, we should aim for larger surplus values. The quote “Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve... it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation” (Tucker, 1978) illustrates how the capitalist system always comes up with a solution to fix problems. Since capitalism is the trade or sales of commodities controlled by private owners for profits, the need for profit is too large to not have a solution for its encountered problems. Communalized modes of production and private surplus might marginalize certain groups of people, but capitalism also fixes the problem of being short in supplies to finish certain tasks, because tasks are only set if they are solvable. For example, although I am marginalized in the labour market, I am still able to obtain a working visa to contribute to the lack of workers currently, and also problems that arise with my citizenship.

Furthermore, Max Weber also discusses orientation to action critiquing capitalism, and introduces the concept of bureaucracy. Firstly, Max defines bureaucracy as institution form of rational authority. Since decisions are made by state officials rather than elected representatives that speak for and considers for everyone, the dark side of bureaucracy includes secrets and power hoarding. Similar to the concept of capitalism discussed by Karl, Max also critiques capitalism having unrealized predictions that includes the nature of transitioning out of capitalism, which results in impoverishment and lost opportunities to minorities. The flawed aspect of this theory is that different classes of people experience different struggles, so to govern all ideas based on the states interest puts down certain distinct groups and prioritizes those with surplus and power. Hence, power hoarding helps capitalists, which is exploited in the

bureaucratic system. Under bureaucracy, access to property and jobs is the economic order of the society, and our life system is based on our position in markets. The quote “In a democracy the people choose a leader in whom they trust. Then the chosen leader says, 'Now shut up and obey me.' People and party are then no longer free to interfere in his business” (Weber, 2015) shows the contradiction in democracy and electing an official if we cannot govern or see what they do. Although the public trusts the chosen leader, not being able to interfere with what they do defeats the purpose of democracy. Max’s concept of status groups suggests that social positions are not solely determined by economic factors, but also by the social esteem attributed to individuals or groups. As an international student, my status and sense of belonging may be influenced by how race, nationality, and cultural background are perceived and valued in the US. Workers in the secondary sector, usually foreigners or immigrants like myself, are always told to shut up and obey because we are in a new environment and those with power think they can make decisions for us. They view foreigners as less humane although the only difference is our skin colour and culture. As a result, social order is based on honor and prestige.

Political power and domination from the top class undermines what minorities are capable of achieving. Max also presents the idea of legitimate authority, where domination is based on the probability of obeying, and authority of a person increases when we see them as more legitimate. For example, state officials are seen as legitimate government representatives, thus, they are one of the most authoritative and powerful individuals in the country. Max states that “one might thus say that classes are stratified according to their relations to the production and acquisition of goods.; whereas status groups are stratified according to their principles of their consumption of goods as represented by special styles of life” (Weber, 2015). Max

highlights that status groups are distinguished by their belief and ability to consume goods through their lavish style of living. On top of that, the production and acquisition of goods can only help you get to a certain status group, and those at the top are distinct, unique, and hard to join. Thus, people need to rationalize their thoughts and ideas through calculations. Increasing predictability, efficiency, and specialization will help you get more opportunities in a bureaucratic system.

However, rationalization leads to disenchantment, losing meaning in life since our rational thoughts take over, and that takes the wonder of what will happen out of our lives. Weber emphasizes on the values and meaning behind actions for culture, and defines action as “social when the acting individual takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course” (Weber, 2015). Disregarding any class or status, being social requires considering how others are behaving, and rationalizing how they act would impact or affect, if at all, the action of its own course. There are rational and non rational actions, and this is extremely important to me when I first came to America. I’ve realized I have to understand and incorporate myself into the American culture, so to learn, I had to rationalize my actions based on the behaviour of people around me. I started to understand how to act specifically in different settings, and how others expect you to behave in certain situations. Specifically, my action was social through the understanding of how restaurant businesses work in the US. Being able to communicate with the server is very important, but this is different in Taiwan as people try to eat as fast as possible and get along with their days. I learned to express my opinions to servers, let them know what I need or don’t need, and be specific. As Karl says, seeking competence is a trap because capitalism and bureaucracy leaves people to cope with problems and dangers by

themselves with no support, but the ability to navigate and eliminate such danger is based on the social status and class of individuals.

In conclusion, the essay explores various themes related to race, capitalism, social norms based on my experiences as an international student. It requires navigating complex social structures and processes that shape one's identity, experiences, and opportunities. As I mentioned above, being labeled as an alien just because of my ethnicity suggests how the society views us as a whole. Similar to Cotton, I have to find the right balance between too much and not enough. Native US citizens who are not familiar with any other culture already has negative images of non resident aliens in their head, and some of them treat you differently because of a sense of selfishness and greed for their land. It is important to try and see past the veil, and stop the double standards based on ancestry. Capitalism exploits alienated workers and creates an unequal distribution of surplus value, and bureaucracy contributes heavily on this system of oppression and exploitation of marginalized groups. Overall, these sociological theories are like maps that considers all perspectives, directs us on everyday life practices, and facilitates our knowledge and communication. By reflecting on my own experiences and analyzing them through the lens of sociological concepts, I gained a deeper understanding of how social structures operate and how they can be transformed to create a more just and equitable world.

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